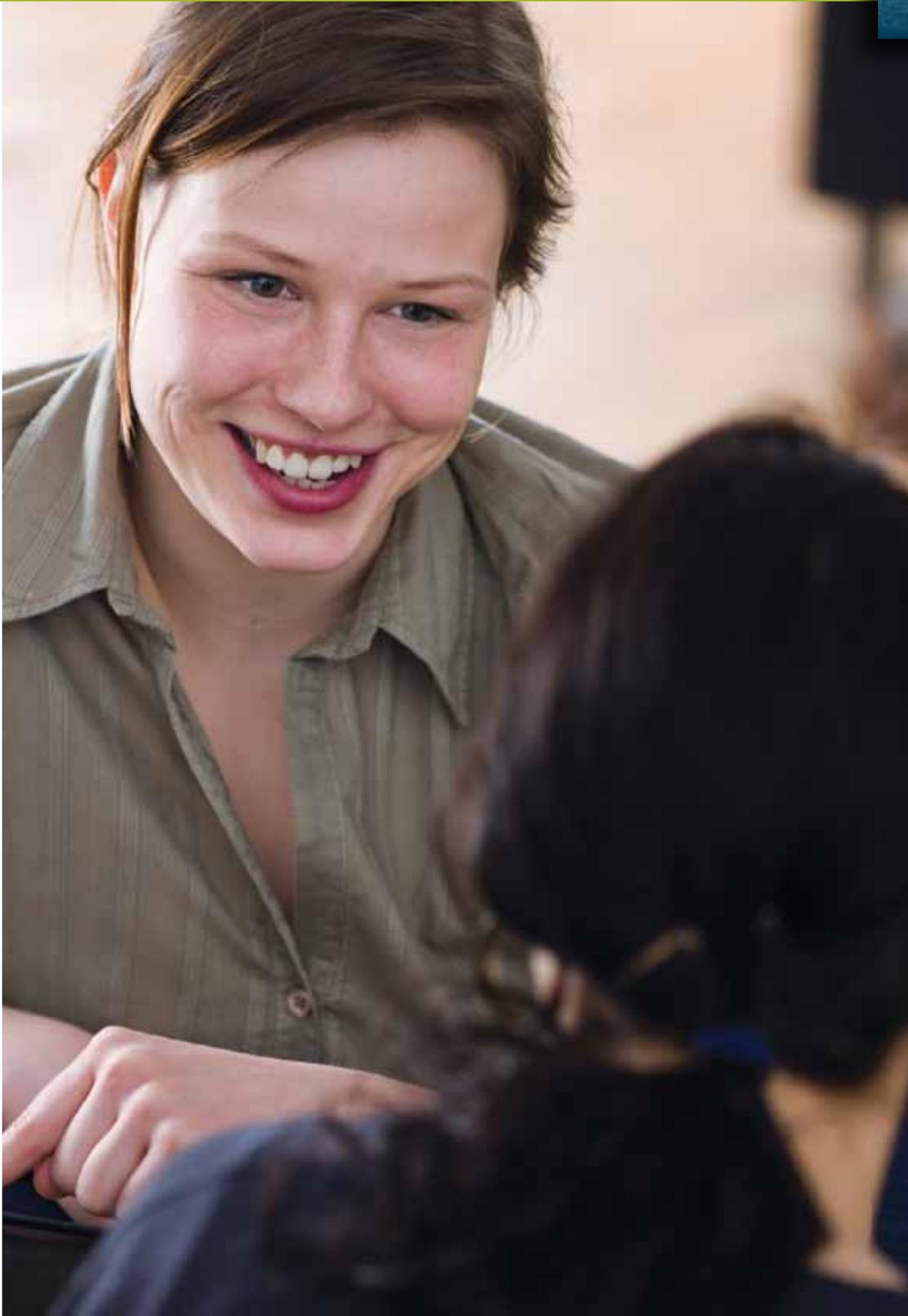


# BRING *the* SKY

The LIRS Detention Visitation Guide



Lutheran Immigration  
and Refugee Service



## MODULE 4

### Being a Visitor

Practical  
Guidance on  
Visiting  
Detained  
Migrants

## About LIRS



### Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

migrant children, and support for migrants at risk of deportation and detention and their families. LIRS advocates for welcome, working with government officials to craft laws and policies that preserve human dignity and guiding churches as they support newcomers through the ups and downs of transition into U.S. society.

With an expertise born of decades of service experience, LIRS works with at-risk migrants, offering critical legal and social support to asylum seekers, torture survivors, and other vulnerable individuals. This expertise, experience, and compassion inform the agency's advocacy for just and humane treatment of those who seek protection, freedom, and opportunity in the United States.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service has been a champion for vulnerable migrants and refugees since 1939. The organization provides resettlement and community integration services for refugees, specialized care for

## About *Bring the Sky*



Abdinasir Mohamed, a Somali journalist, was imprisoned and tortured when he stood up to a terrorist organization. Abdinasir escaped and fled to the United States.

But instead of finding welcome, his freedom was taken again. Abdinasir was detained, shackled, and interrogated for 16 hours before being hauled off to a detention cell.

When a visitor asked him if he missed his family, Abdinasir replied, "I miss my family, but I miss the sky more than anything else. Is American sky blue?"

Abdinasir was freed after seven months and was granted asylum. Many others are held for even longer. All share the same intense longing for a glimpse of freedom. By visiting detained migrants, you can bring that glimpse of freedom—you can bring the sky. A 30- or 60-minute visit can refresh a detainee's spirit, revitalize her courage, rekindle his hope.

*Bring the Sky: The LIRS Detention Visitation Guide* is a series of inspirational and practical resources to help you touch the lives of detained migrants and be touched by the experience. It was developed as part of an ongoing collaboration with the Presbyterian Church (USA) to provide assistance to those affected by immigration detention.

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## Introduction

Welcome to the ministry of detention visitation! Your eagerness to respond to Christ’s call to visit those who are imprisoned is crucial to the success of your group’s program as you together seek to support and encourage detained migrants.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) shares your concern, and we are eager to support your volunteer endeavors. The guidance in this module will help you carry out your role as a compassionate presence and avoid common missteps that may proceed from the best intentions.

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## Respecting Privacy and Confidentiality

Being in detention often takes a toll on an individual’s sense of dignity. One way visitors can honor migrants in detention is by respecting their privacy and carefully observing standards of confidentiality regarding their personal information.

In the context of immigration cases, confidentiality is the respect and discretion we show in handling migrants’ personal information.

### What Information Is Confidential?

The information we must keep confidential includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- names, addresses, phone numbers, and other such data
- countries of origin and immigration statuses
- stories, including abuse, trauma, and persecution they have experienced
- any other information that would identify them or place them at risk

You must also protect the same categories of information regarding their family members.

Confidential information should not be shared with anyone, not even your fellow volunteers. This information is very sensitive for individuals who are in legal proceedings, especially those who fear returning to their home countries. Some migrants might even be at risk in this country if their persecutors knew where they were. Your careful attention to maintaining confidentiality is crucial to protecting the detainees you visit, building a trusting relationship with them, and upholding the reputation of your visitation ministry as a trustworthy program.

### Managing Private Information

Revealing private information could interfere with legal processes and have a life-long impact. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service recommends the following guidelines for managing private information:

- Always err on the side of caution when discussing your visits with friends, family, colleagues, other volunteers, or facility staff. Take care to protect the dignity and privacy of the people you visit.
- No files or documents containing confidential information should ever be shared or released.



- If your experience as a visitor is stressful and you need to vent, talk about your feelings rather than the details of your visit. And of course you can take it to the Lord in prayer...he already knows more about it than you do!
- Contacting embassies or consulate offices can be very detrimental to migrants' legal cases. Many detained individuals have fled persecution by their home countries' governments, so it would be particularly dangerous to let their governments' officials know their whereabouts.
- Don't disclose confidential information attorneys or legal service volunteers, either. If detainees share information related to legal proceedings, encourage them to retell it to their attorneys rather than risking a breach of trust by sharing it yourself.
- As you introduce yourself to individuals in detention, remind them that you are not visiting with any agenda other than providing support and encouragement. You are not legally qualified to assist with their immigration claims. Reiterate your commitment to confidentiality. Remember that your role is that of a compassionate presence, and you are not visiting in search of any specific information, as an attorney or mental health professional might.

### **Protecting Privacy in Public Communication**

Protecting migrants in immigration proceedings is the highest priority when handling private information. But sharing stories is also an important means of garnering interest and support for your ministry. How can you handle what seems to be a case of competing interests? The answer, of course, is "very carefully!"

Follow these guidelines before using any stories for any public communication, whether print, audio, video, or speech:

- Clearly explain to migrants how and why you would like to use their stories. Ensure that they understand who the audience will be.
- Have them sign consent forms that reiterate how the information will be used.
- Remove or alter any identifying or personal information. Change names. Conceal countries of origin (e.g., instead of Guatemala make it Honduras or just go with Central America). Alter story details (e.g., has three brothers rather than two sisters, crossed the Texas border rather than the Arizona border, is 27 rather than 32 years old). Disguise images and voices (your graphic designer or audio engineer can create these effects).
- Carefully consider whether sharing a story would truly be appropriate and safe. Would publicizing it exacerbate trauma, impede a legal case, or negatively affect the individual's safety or dignity in any other way?
- Carefully consider whether the audience is appropriate. Are you sharing the story in a small gathering of prospective volunteers or publishing it on the Internet? Will distribution

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be narrow, as in a grant proposal, or broad, as in a newsletter? If there is a chance that the story will be republished, will that be detrimental to the individual or the legal proceedings?

## **Protocols for Handling Difficult Situations**

**B**e aware that your actions as one individual visitor have the power to set expectations for all visitors and will establish an impression of the program as a whole. Usually that will have very positive results as your compassion and commitment reflect the broader concern of everyone involved in your ministry! But sometimes, and usually quite unintentionally, an action may compromise your relationship with a detainee or damage the reputation of your group.

Don't be scared, but do be prepared. Consider ahead of time how you should handle uncomfortable, awkward, or difficult situations such as these:

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### **Requests for Money or Other Goods**

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service discourages visitors from giving cash or other gifts to the individuals they visit in detention. While it may be difficult to resist offering a small donation, doing so may create tensions and unrealistic expectations for your relationship in the future. It might also damage relationships between other visitors and other migrants who see their fellow detainees receiving gifts.

### **Requests for Housing**

The U.S. government has the discretion to release individuals from immigration detention, but they must remain close to the facility while still in legal proceedings. Unfortunately, many detained migrants will not have family or friends nearby to offer them hospitality, especially if they came to the country alone or if they have been moved from one facility to another. Some need only a few days of shelter, while others may need more long-term housing and services. Attorneys are often scrambling to find housing for the individuals they represent.

Since volunteers have formed trusting relationships with the migrants they visit in detention, they are often asked for assistance with housing upon release. As with giving other gifts, providing housing can create problematic expectations among other migrants and visitors, but you can help in other ways:

- Be aware of the need for housing.
- Share that need with others as you talk about your volunteer work.
- Read Module 5 of *Bring the Sky: The LIRS Guide to Detention Visitation Ministry*, "Farther Steps: Expanding Support Through Advocacy & Community Care," to learn more about post-release support.
- If you expand your involvement in ministering to migrants by becoming involved in post-release support, offer assistance on behalf that program rather than personally.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service coordinates a national effort to provide community-based support for individuals released from U.S. immigration detention. This support includes housing and social



service coordination. The government is more likely to release individuals from detention if they can provide an address where they would stay after being released. Creating a strong national network of community support programs is key to LIRS's efforts to decrease our nation's reliance on detention as a chief means of immigration law enforcement. LIRS may be able to help you find housing for released individuals if you are unaware of options in your area. Contact us at 410-230-2700 or [visitation@lirs.org](mailto:visitation@lirs.org) for more information.

### **Requests for Personal Information**

Just as you will respect the privacy of the detainees you visit, you should expect them to respect your privacy. Although it is important to feel comfortable sharing some personal information, you should not feel pressured to reveal more than is necessary or comfortable. While it is common for people who are develop new relationships to begin by talking about their personal lives, you do not need to disclose details about yourself just because someone asks. Your primary role as a visitor is to listen, so it is appropriate to let the individual you are visiting lead the discussion, but this does not mean you must divulge personal information about yourself with someone you've just met in a detention facility any more than with someone you've just met at a party or on a bus. After all, you do not know how information will be used or where it could potentially be passed once you have shared it with one person. As relationships progress, you will naturally want to share more, but do so only when you feel ready.

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### **Requests for External Communications**

Because communicating with family and friends is often difficult and expensive for individuals in detention, you may be asked to write letters, make phone calls, or send items on behalf of the migrants you visit. Depending on the circumstances, this request may be quick and simple or time consuming and complex. One brief letter may turn into 10 or 20. One simple phone call might put you in the middle of a sticky relationship problem.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service recommends that you not take on letter writing as a regular part of the visitation process. If you were to misinterpret or miscommunicate what an individual is trying to convey, an awkward dynamic might develop and disrupt the friendly relationship you are building. Instead encourage detainees to write their own letters for more accurate communication with their intended audiences.

Your role as a compassionate presence is best played out by offering emotional and spiritual support that may help the individuals you visit better express their thoughts and feelings. If you do offer to assist with external communication, set clear boundaries and let the detainees know to what degree you are willing to help.

Some individuals may request further communication with *you*. Exchanging letters can be an easy way to maintain contact between regularly scheduled visits. But it may help to remind them of the expense of sending letters and of the care they should take regarding what they divulge in writing. Find out if the facility monitors incoming and outgoing mail. If you are not comfortable giving your home address, ask if you can use the church address or some other centralized ministry address. Feel free to send reading materials and other resources, but avoid gifts that could create the sort of awkward expectations we mentioned above in the section on cash gifts.



## **Maintaining Boundaries**

As one of the few points of contact, or perhaps the only point of contact, the individuals you visit have with the outside world, you may feel an inordinate sense of pressure to bear too great a share of their burdens. A better understanding of detainees' needs and a clear definition of your role will help you define and maintain appropriate boundaries in your relationships with them.

### **Understanding the Needs of the Individual in Detention**

While in detention, migrants do not have regular access to the outside world. They are very isolated and alone, often without legal representation or communication with family and friends. As a visitor you may meet with people who are fearful of being deported and anxious about their future. They may or may not have family and friends nearby to support them. Many details work together to create each person's unique story, so go prepared to learn and discover as you meet each individual where they are. Don't assume anything about their stories or their needs, but go with a willingness to listen and learn and respond. Though conversation may begin with you speaking about yourself and talking about the weather or current events, allow plenty of time for the people you are visiting to talk. Let what they say direct the conversation, and as they do, their particular needs will become apparent in time.

You may find you have a lot in common, or you may be as different as night and day, but that's the thing about loving your neighbors—they're the people who happen to be right in front of you, regardless of differences in interests or personality or language or race or a thousand other factors. Sometimes you get to pick your friends, and sometimes you get the adventure of letting God pick them for you. Enjoy the surprise of finding whoever it is you find when you walk through the gates and past the fences!

### **Understanding the Role of the Visitor**

You are not visiting as an attorney, social worker, or mental health professional, you have huge potential to play an important role in the life of the people you visit. Your role is to be a compassionate presence in the lives of individuals who have been deprived of freedom and cut off from the outside world. Their need for emotional support is real and deep. While you cannot expect to fill the entire void single-handedly, your listening and care and company will be a meaningful blessing. Your presence will be a real support to lonely and secluded people who are navigating a difficult phase in their lives. Your only agenda is friendship.

### **Understanding the Role of the Legal Representative**

Legal service providers are most commonly the first point of contact for individuals in detention. They provide all counsel and guidance on matters pertaining to legal cases. Any legal questions or confusion that may arise during the visit should be redirected to the attorney or legal service volunteer. If you encounter detainees who do not have legal representation, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service recommends that you encourage them to reach out to the pro bono attorneys listed on the information provided to them when they were initially detained. LIRS may be able to supply the names of pro bono legal providers in your area. Contact us at [visitation@lirs.org](mailto:visitation@lirs.org) or 410-230-2700 for more information.

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As particular needs become more apparent, turn to the attorney for guidance on how to address issues. It is possible that certain service referrals have already been made or the attorney has begun working with their client on the matter that you are concerned about. Remember that even if you have pertinent experience and expertise, your role as a visitor is to serve as a compassionate presence, not as an attorney or clinical mental health professional, so avoid giving advice that it is their role to give. Immigration law is very complicated and you and the migrants you visit likely don't have all the information about their cases. Well-meaning but flawed advice has the potential to seriously jeopardize their legal cases.

## **Conclusion**

**L**utheran Immigration and Refugee Service hopes that the information in this module gives you a sufficient foundation for proceeding with detention visitation. If you have questions that we have not answered above and that your program coordinators or mentors cannot answer, we would welcome the opportunity to fill in the gaps. Please contact us at [visitation@lirs.org](mailto:visitation@lirs.org) or 410-230-2700 with any questions or feedback on *Bring the Sky: The LIRS Guide to Detention Visitation*.

Thank you for joining LIRS in carrying out our mission of welcome. Blessings on your visitation ministry!

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